Paul Robbins

Finding my chance to be me

My journey with high-functioning autism

I have spent almost my entire life feeling different. It seemed as though there was a set of social rules that everyone else appeared to live by, and those rules just didn't work for me. Social interactions have always been difficult for me. When trying to express my thoughts and feelings to others it has always seemed to get lost in translation somewhere between my mouth and their ears. Over time, I learned to assimilate and to act the way others expected me to. Shakespeare once wrote, "All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players." This is how I saw myself, as an actor that never got to exit the stage, but had to keep performing.

I existed in a state that was removed from reality. I had friends that I cared about, and they cared about me, but they didn't know me. Life always felt uncomfortable. Social pressure, loud places like sports games, or exposure to bright sunlight has the potential to shut me down inside. When that happens, I feel much like a walking zombie with a dark cloud over my head. I can't smile if I try, and it's something I just have to wait out.

Getting help was a struggle. I was raised to believe that mental illness was a sham. People who didn't want to live life right would blame their anxiety, depression, etc. on mental illness. As a result, I was very judgmental of myself. The only logical way to see myself was as a failure. As I grew up, I kept trying to find a place where I "fit." In college I switched majors many times and finally picked one that held the promise of high demand and good pay. This led me down a road of career switches and additional degrees to escape the misery of my circumstances. After working in secondary education for several years, I decided to escape to higher education. After getting my second master's degree I started applying to junior colleges.

About this time, I received an interesting email for a job as an academic librarian. What in the world is an academic librarian, I thought? I ended up applying for the job and was hired and trained virtually in 2021. As the pandemic quarantine drew to a close, I was nervous to come to work in person because I didn't know what to expect. But as time went on in the library, layers of apprehension started to fall away, and I found myself in a workplace where I felt safe for the first time. I felt I could be myself, whoever that was. I had spent my adult life in the assimilation and emotional hiding places that accompany emotional survival. I was now faced with the option of being able to be myself. This started me on a road of self-discovery, one in which I'm sure will continue for many years. As I started asking questions about how I work, it was suggested to me that I may be autistic. The first time I took an

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assessment to gauge my autism, it was like I was finding a place where I "fit," and I felt hope that I could be understood by others.

I see my journey down this path enabled by two things, both of which I needed to move forward. The first is a spouse who was supportive and wanted to look for the good that was in me. The second was a safe work environment. I had never felt safe at work before. I was always trying to assimilate and be who I thought I needed to be. As an academic librarian I felt valued. I felt I had something to contribute. I attribute that largely to the supportive nature of the work environment at BYU library. It felt safe to mess up. After being hired, I was immediately invited to join committees and collaborate on projects. I felt a push to discover what I could contribute, and I felt that I had some wiggle room to figure things out without the fear of judgement. This was highly supportive—a stark contrast to the sink or swim mentality that I was accustomed to. It was not just what the library environment was, but what it wasn't that made a difference. It *was* welcoming, supportive, positive, and encouraging. It *wasn't* judgmental, dismissive, or competitive. This allowed me to start to value my own way of interacting with others.

As I consider my own experience, there are some solid takeaways that I see for libraries trying to be more inclusive. Be aware of what is hiding in plain sight. We need to be inclusive and welcoming to *everyone*, not just the group that is currently in the spotlight. Be aware that people *surround* you with special needs, which probably includes you on certain days. We all have our days where we need extra support, but that need is often invisible to others.

Create an environment that is supportive to employees. Set employees up for success by creating opportunities for them to contribute. The low confidence that can be associated with a feeling of being "different" makes it difficult to stick your neck out and shine in your strengths. Give credit where it is due. Let people shine in their strengths even if they do it in a way that is different from you. Many are uncomfortable tooting their own horn. Be encouraging to everyone and have the introverts take charge occasionally. It will create a safer environment if those with strong personalities are not the only ones in positions of influence.

Applying my experience to the library environment in general, I see strong connections to how libraries are trying to establish equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). Perhaps the first step toward achieving such an environment is to create a safe place for those who work in it. Social norms are, after all, built for those who are social in nature. Might we consider changing expectations that might subconsciously tell us that for us to respect or value someone's contributions, they should adhere to the same social cues that we value? ✿